

the Shepherdess

13 THINGS YOU NEED TO START A SHEEP FARM



image © the Shepherdess



*"He shall feed His flock
like a shepherd: He shall
gather the lambs with His
arm, and carry them in
His bosom, and shall
gently lead those that are
with young."
Isaiah 40:11*

Foreword

[Click HERE for books on
Rotational Grazing!](#)

This book covers a list of 13 things a beginner needs to start a sheep farm. This list is geared toward flocks of 30 sheep or less on 30 acres or less. **View this information as a springboard for continued education and not a complete guide book.** As a shepherd, the learning never stops.

I advocate for raising sheep on pasture using an intensive rotational grazing system. This means moving your flock at least twice a week during the growing season. Rotational grazing mimics the way sheep were created to live and will significantly improve the health of your flock. Before rotational grazing, my flock mortality rate was at 30% annually (mostly parasite related death). After implementing rotational grazing, mortality dropped to 13.5% in just one year!! Industry average for sheep farming is 15-20%.

Most importantly, remember that **sheep need a shepherd**. For success in sheep farming, you must be prepared to undertake a role as much as an animal. When you approach sheep farming with this understanding, frustration will fade into a sense of duty and you will enjoy it.

The Shepherdess



#1 *Resolve:*

*"AND GOD IS ABLE TO
MAKE ALL GRACE
ABOUND TOWARD YOU..."
2 COR. 9.8*

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

You must go into sheep farming with a lot of resolve (and, I would argue, faith in the Lord). Sheep have a much lower margin for error than other farm animals. They may appear fine one day, and be dead the next (typically due to parasites). **Regardless of how well-researched you are, there will be a learning curve.**

Some of your sheep will die. You will want to quit. You will listen to the world say "those sheep aren't worth it"... and you will probably agree with them some days.

But here is the thing: **it is worth it.** To look out at your flock and know that their well-being is directly tied to your care... that feeling cannot be described.

I have had a lot of jobs. Most of them have paid me more than sheep farming ever will. But no job on earth has given me the level of fulfillment that this role of shepherdess has.

Think big, start small, don't quit.©

-the Shepherdess



#2 *Food:*

SHEEP NEED A MINIMUM
7% PROTEIN CONTENT
IN THEIR DIET.

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

[Click HERE for books on
Rotational Grazing!](#)

Whether you feed all grass or all hay, sheep need a diet with a protein content of roughly 7% (merckvetmanual.com). If your flock is grazing green pasture, it is almost 100% certain they are getting all the protein they need. If you are feeding hay, ask about the protein content in the hay you buy.

In order to keep your operating costs low and your sheep healthy, rotational grazing your sheep is ideal. You can carry 2-4 sheep per acre, depending on rainfall and grass density. In addition to grass, I always keep a container of loose mineral right beside their water (mineral blocks damage the teeth).

In winter I feed hay plus a daily ration of 1/3-3/4 lb alfalfa pellets. The alfalfa pellets have a protein content of 14% and will make up for any hay that contains less than 7% protein.

There are some portions of the country where 100% grazing is not an option. In such cases, simply follow the hay/alfalfa feeding instructions year round. You can use a variety of things in place of the alfalfa pellets (many people use grain). The overall goal is to make sure your sheep have enough protein.



image © the Shepherdess



A water tank on the back of a UTV allows me to provide water to paddocks with no hose access.



#3 Water:

A GRAZING SHEEP ONLY
DRINKS AROUND 1/3
GALLON OF WATER PER
DAY!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms



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Unless your sheep are on dry feed, they will only consume about 1/3-1 gallon of water per day! When grazing lush pasture you can expect 1/3 gallon per sheep per day. When eating dry feed (hay, pellets, etc), you can expect 2/3 gallon per sheep per day. When it is above 85 degrees you can expect a full gallon per sheep per day*.

A sheep's low water intake provides a lot of flexibility with respect to a watering system. When hoses do not reach a paddock, five gallon buckets with lids make a great watering system. A bonus is that after 3 weeks of hauling you will be able to cancel your gym membership!

Since my flock is larger now, I use a 65 gallon water tank on the back of a UTV for water refills. This is setup will take care of up to 65 sheep on a hot summer day.

*Watch the trough and adjust figures if you find your sheep needing more.



PC: TractorSupply.com

Mineral mix found locally.



Automatic dog feeder protects minerals from rain.

#4 Minerals:

ALWAYS BUY GRANULAR MINERALS. THE BLOCKS CAN DAMAGE SHEEP TEETH!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

If this book has helped you:



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Grass, hay, and grain will not provide all of the vitamins and minerals your sheep need to thrive. Make sure your sheep have access to a loose mineral at all times!

Right now I use an all-purpose mineral from my local farm store. Due to a selenium deficiency in my soil I recently added **Redmond Salt Selenium 90** to my mineral regimen. This Redmond mixture **must be diluted** by 1/2 (using plain salt) due to high copper content. Be aware before using it for your sheep!

Make sure the mineral mix says it is suitable for sheep. Certain trace elements in cow or goat minerals (such as copper) can be toxic to sheep in excess quantity.

Keep your sheep minerals dry or your sheep will not eat them! I use an automatic dog feeder for my minerals. I hedge it in with cinder blocks or tie it to the fence line to keep the sheep from knocking it over.



image © the Shepherdess

Using electric netting for a rotational grazing paddock.

#5 Fencing:

GOOD FENCING WILL SAVE
YOU A LOT OF STRESS AND
EMBARRASSMENT AS A
SHEEP FARMER!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms



My woven wire perimeter fence.

In sheep farming, a perimeter fence will be one of your biggest investments. "Perimeter fence" refers to the fence that outlines your property line, and not the temporary electric fence used for rotational grazing.

If you do not install a solid perimeter fence, I recommend using electric netting instead of polytape for your grazing paddocks. I have had plenty of sheep escape my poly tape, but I have not **yet** had a sheep escape a well-charged electric netting.

There are a lot of perimeter fencing options, so I'll just tell you what kind of fence is on my farm. When we bought the farm there was a 5-strand barbed wire perimeter fence (for cows) installed. We added a woven wire fencing over the barbed wire to keep our sheep in. It was expensive, but **very sturdy and reliable**. There are several lower-cost options when it comes to perimeter fencing. I will plan to cover in a book of it's own.

For now just understand that a good perimeter fence will save you a lot of stress and embarrassment as a sheep farmer!

image © the Shepherdess



#6 Shelter:

OPTIONS FOR SHEEP
SHELTERS ARE ONLY
LIMITED BY YOUR
IMAGINATION!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

If this book has helped you:



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Sheep are hardy animals and can spend 24/7 on pasture without much trouble.

Shelter is important when it comes to freezing rain, extended periods of snow, or lambing. Shelter can be as simple as a carport on skids (portable!), or as complicated as building a permanent structure. I would recommend avoiding a permanent structure until you are at least one year into your sheep farming journey.

At my farm I rely on trees for shade and shelter 95% of the time. For lambing, freezing rain, and snow I bring my sheep to a 2-sided shed. This same style shelter could easily be built in a very economic fashion. Just make sure the closed side faces north: that is the direction those biting winds comes from!

Check out my [DIY portable shade units for summer](#) here!



#7 *Defense:*

SOME FORM OF PREDATOR PROTECTION MUST BE PUT INTO PLACE TO AVOID LOSSES!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

If this book has helped you:



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Sheep are defenseless and make a perfect midnight snack for wild dogs and coyote! Defense against predators can be one of 3 things: a livestock guardian dog, a gated shelter, or good fencing.

A good livestock guardian dog is the most reliable option. A sheep farmer told me that he replaced his guard donkey with a guard dog because he realized "you have to fight predators with predators". This made sense to me. A dog becomes part of the flock and moves with the sheep wherever they go.

Penning your sheep in an enclosed shelter overnight is another good option. A con is that it is difficult to move a flock on and off pasture twice a day and manure can build up pretty quickly. However, if I had to choose between sleeping in manure or death by coyote, I would choose the manure.

Good fencing (6" woven wire or smaller) is also a good defense against predators. If your fence is tight enough to keep a sheep in, it will keep a lot of the predators out!

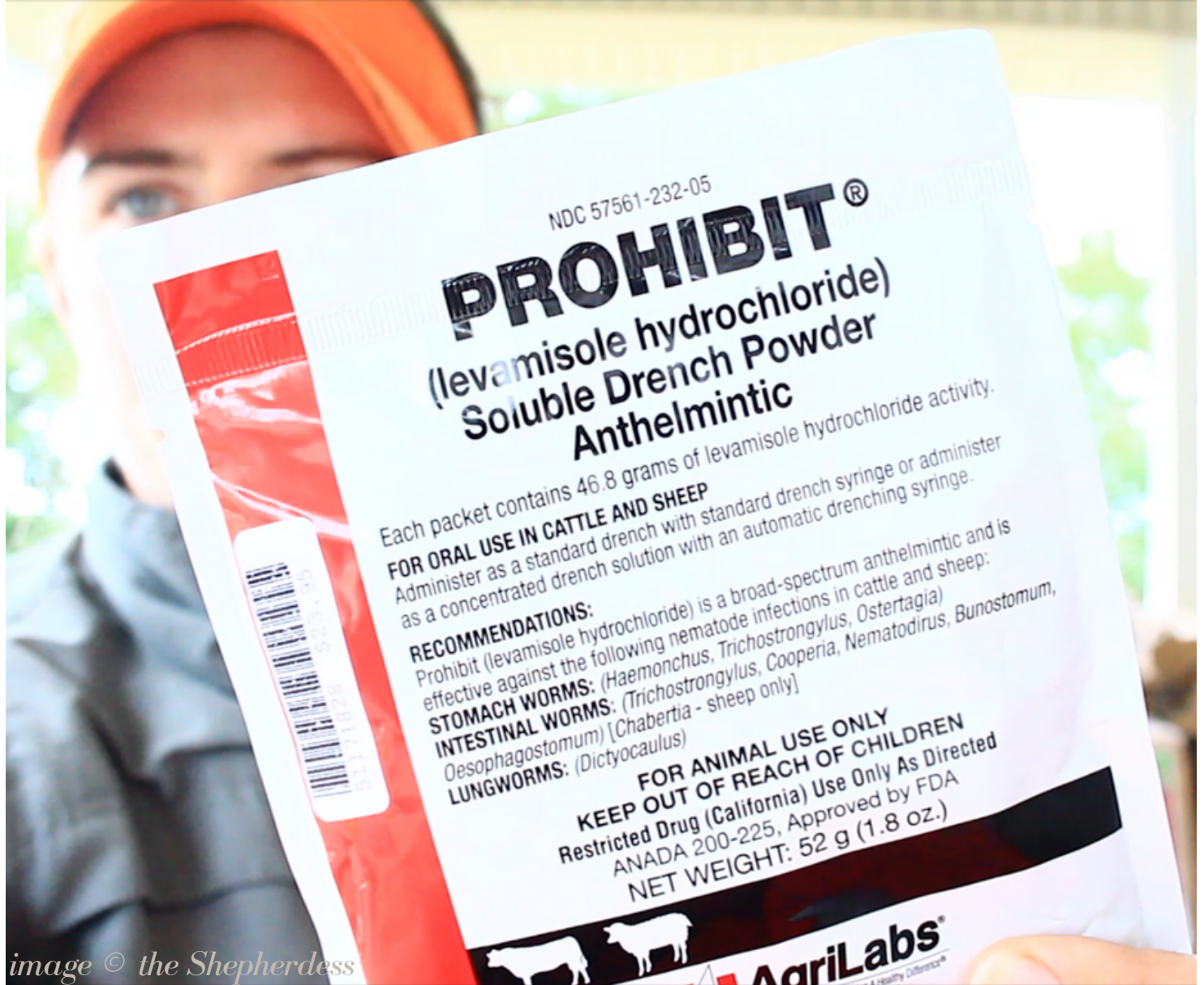


image © the Shepherdess

#8 *Dewormer:*

PARASITES WILL BE YOUR BIGGEST ENEMY AS A SHEEP FARMER. DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THEM!!!

WARNING: Ignore the dosage instructions on the Prohibit package and use this [Dewormer Chart from Clemson University](#).

I deworm my flock with Prohibit (chemical dewormer) and rotational grazing. On small acreage, **rotational grazing is not enough to control parasite problems**. Ivermectin is no longer an effective dewormer in most areas, so avoid using it.

I deworm my lambs for the first time at 6-8 weeks. Ewes are dewormed 2 weeks prior to lambing and 2 weeks after lambing. Ewes are physically weaker during lambing and parasite burdens can become life threatening.

Beyond these two critical points I run the flock through my handling system every 30 days to inspect their eyelids for anemia. I give dewormer to any sheep with pale pink or white eyelids. ([CLICK HERE](#) for FAMACHA scoring instructions)

I run controlled culls on sheep that need too much dewormer. This means I deworm my sheep whenever they need it, but if that is too frequently I will sell the sheep or turn it into lamb chops.



If your flock is 20 or less, try to DIY your handling system in order to cut costs. [Click this image for a video DIY.](#)

#9 *Handling System:*

FOR FLOCKS OF 20 OR LESS, A SMALL PEN IS ENOUGH OF A HANDLING SYSTEM FOR MOST TASKS!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

When handling sheep remember two things: #1 sheep will usually remain calm if they are tightly bunched together. #2 If there is enough room in the pen for the sheep to run from you, it is going to be a very long day!

For these two reasons, you want a handling system that creates close quarters! For a flock of 10-20 sheep a narrow, rectangular pen would make a great beginner handling system. You could create this pen with a variety of inexpensive or recycled materials.

The first few times you handle your flock will be a rodeo. As your flock becomes familiar with the routine, things will calm down (maybe the 3rd or 4th time). Don't be discouraged by the difficulty up front! Stay calm and your flock will follow your lead.

Once your flock reaches 30 breeding ewes, I would begin getting serious about a streamlined handling system ([Lakeland has commercial options](#)). Your flock of 30 will swell to a flock of 70-90 at lambing. Working that many sheep by hand will begin to take a toll on your body!



image © the Shepherdess

#10 Hoof Care:

WHEN IT COMES TO
HOOVES, AN OUNCE OF
PREVENTION IS WORTH A
POUND OF CURE.

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

Sheep are bred for rocky terrain. In nature, sheep encounter elements that wear down the hoof (rocks, mountains, steep terrain).

When raising sheep on a soft, grassy pasture there is no opportunity for sheep to wear their hooves down. To amend for this, I trim hooves and run the sheep through a disinfectant foot bath once a year (usually during weaning).

For a complete list of hoof trimming and foot bath supplies, [click here](#).



CD/T vaccine



Disposable syringes

18g, 3/4" needle

PC: Premier1Supplies.com

#11 Vaccines:

USING THEM OR NOT IS YOUR CHOICE. JUST BE SURE TO MAKE AN EDUCATED DECISION.

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

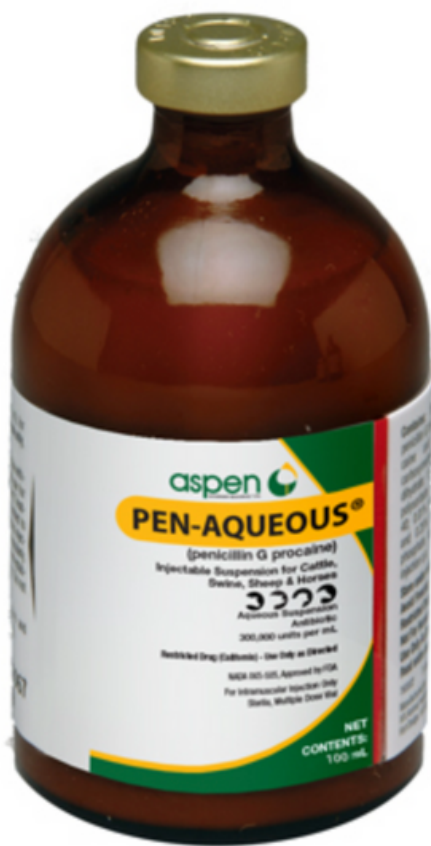


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Vaccination will be a personal farm-management decision. It is ok to weigh the risks and skip vaccinations for your flock, just know you may occasionally lose a sheep to one of the conditions mentioned below. On my farm I vaccinate my breeding stock (ewes and rams), but not my meat animals.

The vaccine I use is labeled CD/T. CD/T guards the sheep against tetanus and Overeaters Disease. Tetanus can be harbored in rusty metal or fencing on pasture as well as horse manure. Overeaters disease happens when the sheep grazes too much high-protein feed at once (such as clover) or is given too much grain.

Vaccine shots are given to the lamb at 6-8 weeks of age, with a booster administered 4 weeks later. Adult sheep also need a booster shot once a year. To avoid the first shot for the lamb you can time your flock's booster shot to be 4 weeks before lambing. This will allow the lamb to get the vaccine dosage through its mom's milk. Just don't forget the booster shot at 12 weeks!



Antibiotic for sheep.



Disposable syringe.

3/4", 18g. Needle

#12 *Antibiotics:*

ANTIBIOTICS ARE A GOOD
TOOL TO HELP YOUR SHEEP
PAST AN EMERGENCY!

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

If this book has helped you:



Buy Me a Coffee

Antibiotics are a tool to help your sheep past an emergency. Use them sparingly, however, because in addition to destroying infection, they will destroy good bacteria in the sheep's gut.

I keep an antibiotic in my sheep first aid kit for emergencies such as:

- Assisted lambing (one where my hand has gone into or beyond the birth canal).
- Mastitis (infection of the udder).
- Foot rot infection (it is advised that you treat the infection with antibiotic before trimming the hoof)
- Pneumonia.
- Follow up after deep-wound care.

The brand of antibiotic that I use is PEN-AQUEOUS. It can be found at most local farm stores. I administer shots with a disposable syringe and a 3/4", 18 gauge needle.



image © the Shepherdess

A new member of my flock receiving a health check before becoming part of my breeding program!

#13 *Livestock* *Vet:*

A LOCAL LIVESTOCK VET
WILL ANSWER YOUR
QUESTIONS BETTER THAN
GOOGLE 9/10 TIMES.

By the Shepherdess at
Harmony Farms

When you decide to buy sheep, find your local livestock vet. Once you find them, give them a call and tell them you are getting ready to buy sheep and would like to be put on their patient roster.

Rural livestock vets are very casual and may not require this kind of forewarning, but it is good to get in touch just in case!

While it will be very expensive to take a sheep to the vet for every little problem, many livestock vets will walk you through problems over the phone!

As always, my classic disclaimer is: consult your veterinarian before implementing any of my advice on your farm!



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